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ABSTRACT

Based on the observation that freshman composition students associate writing with pain and unpleasantness and have been given little opportunity to engage in enjoyable writing, this paper advocates a method for making freewriting and the journal central and integral dimensions of the writing class. After discussing the techniques and the benefits of freewriting, as presented by Peter Elbow, the paper tells how students may be asked to alternate between structured and totally free journal entries and how they may then each choose one of their entries to turn into a finished paper. It explains how the class members and the teacher can help each student writer decide what type of audience to address, what method to use to organize the paper, and how to find more details. The paper then presents a sequence of 31 writing assignments, based on James Moffett's work, which involves students in the processes of recording, reporting, analyzing, and evaluating. (GT)

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WRITING: A PAINFUL PROCESS

Recently my fifth-grade daughter came home from school, announcing that she had to write a composition for the following day on her responsibilities as a student. My heart leaped up! Here is a teacher who intends to stress writing in her fifth-grade class. My delight quickly turned to dismay, however, when my daughter added that the writing assignment was a punishment for the class because they had been too noisy during lunch.

I mention this incident from my personal life because it is a telling example of the kinds of experiences that many of our students have faced for the twelve years before they arrive, sometimes hostile, almost always reluctant, in our composition classes. If our students have written before at all when they come to us, they have usually written only because they were forced to write for their English teachers. They invariably associate writing with pain and unpleasantness, as if it were some fearful medicine. In surveys given to my freshman writing classes in the last few years, I find that very few have written anything except a few papers for English classes. Some have not even written then; they have, as we all know, spent their time on grammar and literature. When asked what they enjoy most about writing, however, the overwhelming majority of these students answers that they enjoy writing about subjects they know about, writing to express themselves in subjects which interest them, and writing in which they can use their imaginations. Ironically, they have been given little opportunity to engage in any writing of this kind. What they enjoy least about writing, they say, is being pressured into writing on topics about which they know nothing and care less. As one frustrated student expressed it: "I don't enjoy a bunch of dumb, general, vague, general assignments from English teachers, like 'Compare two novels,' or 'Write a paper on Macbeth'." (Their criticisms of our assignments sound remarkably like our criticisms of their writing!)

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I suspect that these hostile attitudes on the part of students are familiar to all of us. And the written responses to vague assignments are invariably flat and platitudinous. We asked for it; we got it. No wonder, then, that increasingly, writing teachers are making more extensive use of journals and freewriting in their composition classes as a way to encourage students to write, as William Coles expresses it, "in their own voices." Surely we are all tired of the English theme persona--teachers and students alike. And, successful writing teachers such as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, Lou Kelly, and a host of others, have given composition teachers an abundant harvest of resources to enrich the teaching of writing in their own classes.

Peter Elbow advocates the practice of ten-minute freewriting in order to enable students to discover their own meanings. By"freewriting" Elbow means just that. Students begin writing and keep writing for ten minutes, even if they have to fill in with nonsense phrases. Conventional advice to student writers has urged them to figure out what it is that they have to say, to create a plan or outline, and finally to begin writing. Elbow asserts (and I believe that our own writing experience verifies his assertion) that such an approach to writing is backward. As Elbow expresses the notion: "Meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with. Control, coherence, and knowing your mind are not what you start with but what you end up with. Think of writing then not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message."[1] Throughout his book, Elbow's message is the same: "Start writing and keep writing."

For many of our students, especially those who suffer unusually acute cases of verbal paralysis and lack of fluency in writing, Elbow's

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[1] Peter Elbow, Writing without Teachers (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 15.

practices, which resemble what many teachers of composition do with journals, may promote the act of writing. Such freewriting helps to free students from the perennial problem of getting stuck. And sooner or later a student who writes in this way will come up with something valuable, something worth keeping and polishing. Out of this chaotic energy a center of gravity will emerge and begin to attract satellites of words and phrases. Elbow's description of the writing process thus gives us a picture of dynamic energy: bubbling, cooking, growing, whirling -- words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, meaning, and finally communication. The results of such journalizing is that students learn to write in their own voices; a measure of the fake writing of freshman students disappears. Some students even discover for the first time what it is to "play" with language. As the student of one of my colleagues wrote:

I have totally nothing to write
Nothings
nothings
Things no
thin no gs
no Things

I haven't a thing to write
to write I haven't a thing
A thing to write I haven't
Haven't a thing to write

While this student deals with the frustrating experience of getting stuck in writing, a maddening experience which has afflicted all of us at one time or another, she is also learning to experiment with the limits and possibilities of language and mechanics. Such innovative play, obviously, may result in some important writing at a future time--a poem perhaps, or at least a keener sense of appreciation for the manifestations of language.

Elbow's system of freewriting differs from the traditionally "free" use of the journal in that it is the very heart and center of his writing

class, not in limbo outside the "real" assignments in the course. Despite the merits of Elbow's approaches, not all writers compose in the same way. For some students such "free" freewriting as Elbow advocates may itself become a barrier or block to writing. For such students, those who have a more intense "rage for order", a teacher may wish to use the journal (or freewriting exercises) as money in the bank to be invested for larger dividends in terms of a finished paper. Many teachers of writing, after all, are forced to give grades in their composition classes; that fact for some students may be an incentive to invest in good writing capital in the journal against that final pay-off, the grade on the finished paper.

To use the journal in this way, the teacher may wish to give some thought to the careful sequencing of assignments, moving from the simplest, which may require the recording of ideas or information, through report, analysis, and evaluation. James Moffett recommends such a system in his important book Teaching the Universe of Discourse. This term, for example, I am alternating between a system of questions one week in which students respond in the form of more structured journal entries and totally free, unstructured journal entries the next.

After a period of four weeks, I then ask students to choose one of these entries to turn into a finished paper. Our class discussions center around the possibilities we see in each journal entry; we ask each other questions, give advice, take notes -- al. in the hope that confronting the formidable and unfelicitous empty spaces of white paper, will not be quite so painful to students who have learned through hard experience to fear committing pen to paper.

In helping students transform freewriting into a finished draft, we have to help them make meaningful choices. Students have presumably discovered an idea in the course of the freewriting or journal entry. Members of the writing class and the writing teacher then need to help the student writer decide what audience he or she wishes to address: perhaps the writing class itself, especially if the writing is based upon personal experience; perhaps a more impersonal audience if the form of the writing turns out to be a letter, a proposal, a protest. Some form of actual publication may also be discussed, such as a local or student newspaper. Discussing the choices of audience may lead to a consideration of how this audience may inform the style, tone, and point of view of the finished paper.

We may also use the class to help students discover an appropriate method of organizing the paper. Freewriting and journal entries usually contain the rudiments of form. Class members may observe possibilities for before/after or compare/contrast modes of organization. (Ken Macrorie suggests that "the Journey" and "the Hook" emerge often as possible organizing principles at this point in the pre-writing stage.)[2] The piece may also imply a circular movement, such as departure/return, or it may simply be linear. In any event the student writer, having developed the pattern or organization needed through an organic process at the freewriting stage, can perhaps acquire greater control over the piece of writing by becoming conscious of the possibilities of form at the writing stage of his or her paper. Organization and arrangement have thus evolved organically from the writer's needs, rather than having been imposed externally and mechanically.

Students can also help each other invent more details where they

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[2] Ken Macrorie, "Writing to be Read," Rhetoric and Composition, Edited by Richard L. Graves (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1976), p. 55.

where they are needed. If enough details are not included (and they rarely are), the class may suggest ways to find more details: through observation and memory, through interview, or through reading and research.

During these in-class sessions, the student whose freewriting is being discussed should take notes busily against that ultimately lonely task -- writing in a room of one's own. Student writers will face this ordeal with more forbearance, though, if they have a keen sense of audience with whom they wish to communicate, if they are armed with an abundance of materials which classmates and the teacher have helped to assemble, and if they have become conscious of some organizing principle. At the pre-writing stage, then, the writer had lacked control, coherence, and content; by the writing stage, however, he or she should at least be making positive steps toward acquiring these characteristics. The writer should be moving from freewriting into the more disciplined first draft. At this point most writers need the tension of a deadline to produce a respectable draft ready for the post-writing or editing stage.

My goal in conducting such a writing class is to make freewriting and the journal central and integral dimensions of the writing class, rather than isolating them to unessential and irrelevant areas of activity. Such an approach reduces excessive insignificant diary entries, in which students note that they have brushed their teeth or consumed a Big Mac. Thus I hope to lead them inductively into more analytical and critical finished writing through the systematic and careful use of the journal and freewriting.

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SEQUENCE OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
(Based on James Moffett's scheme outlined in Teaching the Universe of Discourse)

I. Recording

For reluctant writers, but especially for basic writers, activities involving recording details, facts, dialogue, etc. may help promote writing fluency. Most students simply have not written enough, and truly basic writers, as Mina Shaughnessy points out in Errors and Expectations, have not yet mastered handwriting skills. They lack basic mental-motor coordination which will enable them to make progress in writing. "Recording" thus enables students to practice the act of writing, to employ the skills of listening and observing, and to increase their speed and efficiency in note-taking.

1. Go to a public place -- a laundramat, a refectory, a park, anywhere -- and record what you see, hear, smell, in as much detail as possible. To prepare students for this assignment, teachers may show a short film in class. After showing the film, have students write down as many details as possible about the film. The purpose here is not to analyze the film but to observe and record details. If students are truly having difficulty writing fast enough to record information, the teacher may wish to engage the class in even more basic activities to prepare them for recording, such as in-class dictating, a practice which may be especially beneficial to non-native speakers and writers. The teacher may wish to discuss the use of specific words and phrases in helping students prepare to complete the assignment.

2. Record an over-heard conversation in as much detail as possible. (This can be done unobtrusively in a restaurant, a student center, lounge, perhaps before class in some other course.) Students will need to identify the context or setting in which the conversation will take place and the speakers. The point of this freewriting assignment is again to gather as much detail as possible.
   To prepare students for completing this assignment, you may have them conduct skits, mock talk shows in class, while the members of the class practice taking down the conversation. You can then discuss various perspectives and points of view on the conversation, in what ways it was perceived by various members of the class.

3. Have students record the lyrics of their favorite popular song. This activity will give students the needed practice in recording and may also provide interesting topics for further writing, since the lyrics may provide insights into the values of youth culture.

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(Class discussion on both the over-heard conversation and the popular song can focus upon the importance of dialogue and detail in narrative writing. You may also have the opportunity to discuss levels of usage, differences in dialect, differences in written and spoken English, and a sense of audience in both written and spoken discourse.)

4. Bring a bag full of odd items to class--keys,wire sculpture, pictures, etc. Have students observe and handle the objects and then write descriptions of them. This is a much-used device in writing classes which still works very well for some classes. Follow-up discussions will reveal an interesting variety of approaches taken by students to the objects. Some students will approach them as symbol, some by association, and some will come up with minute descriptions of the objects themselves.

5. Listen for what children say and look for what they write. Use a tape recorder if available. Write down five statements you think are memorable. Include the age of the child if possible and the situation in which he spoke or wrote. Ask your parents if they remember a phrase you spoke when you were young. Perhaps they preserved a bit of your writing. Record children's statements that are remarkable because they reveal freshness, accuracy, and invention in language. Do not record statements that are humorous only because the child speaks out of ignorance of the world or of language. (Ken Macrorie, Writing to be Read, p. 4.)

6. Write for ten minutes as fast as you can, never stopping to ponder a thought. Keep writing even if you have to use nonsense phrases. Or look out the window and record what you see. Just keep writing. (Peter Elbow, Writing without Teachers)

II. REPORTING

Reporting obviously involves more skill than recording, since students are required to comprehend the essential details of a situation, to summarize, to select, and to arrange details. Matters of organization thus enter the picture, as well as more subtle aspects of writing: a sense of audience, the consistent use of an objective tone. Reporting is an important skill; activities involving reporting may range from personal experience freewriting to note-taking for research papers.

1. Tell us about the most beautiful place or object you have ever seen. (The direction "tell us" helps students to develop a genuine sense of their class members as audience.)
2. Tell us about the most frightening/embarassing/humiliating experience you remember.
3. Tell us the funniest incident you remember from elementary school days.
4. Tell us of your first encounter with a bully, a thief, a liar, a hero, etc.

5. Conduct an interview with someone who interests you. (Since the interview is an important skill, involving several dimensions of communication, the teacher may need to prepare the class to complete the assignment through preliminary freewriting exercises. The following pre-writing exercise has helped my classes:

   (a) Read or view an interview and write down at least a ten-minute segment of it in as much detail as possible. This interview may be a newspaper or magazine feature or article, or it may be a television interview. For example, you will find very different kinds of interviews going on in a local news show from the ones you are likely to see on Dinah Shore, Mike Douglas, or Johnny Carson. The "Today" show on NBC will feature still a different kind of interview. I do not care what kind you prefer; just get it down in as much detail as possible.

   (b) Write a journal entry explaining what seemed to be the purpose of the interview which you viewed or read. (Was the interviewer trying to discover information about an issue, such as the energy crisis or "black holes" in space, by interviewing several people who have expertise in the area? Or was the interviewer trying to reveal interesting features of a person's personality, career, character? Or was the interviewer primarily interesting because he or she wished to entertain the audience and promote his or her own personality?

   (c) Write an entry in which you note the kinds of questions which were asked in the interview you observed; what information seemed essential? If you were viewing an interview, what devices other than conversation and questions were used to portray the person's personality and presence? For example, did the camera move in for close-up shots? Did the interviewer present the person at home, at work, in the studio? Then consider the kinds of questions you might ask someone.

FOLLOW-UP The freewrites become the basis of one class meeting, in which class considers the purpose of interviews, the audience, problems in conducting the interview itself. It is also useful to conduct mock-up interviews in class, thereby enabling students to practice conducting an interview.

6. Find out what happened in the world on the day you were born.
7. R. Baird Shuman, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, recommends the following exercise for developing fluency: "In the 'Even-Steven Swap Game,' I give students ten words and ask them, working in groups, to swap me a story for ten words. The story must use each word at least once...A typical list includes deliberations, homicide, investigation, manslaughter, negligent, perpetually, supermarket, testimony, 38-calibur, and verdict.

(OVER)

Any story generated from this combination of words would probably involve a crime and subsequent trial. The students' imagination provide the details, and they do so rather easily because they are working from point ten, not point zero. (R. Baird Shuman, "Basics in Composition: Fluency First," Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1977-1978: Teaching the Basics Really!NCTE, 1977, Stock #06870)

8. Have students practice the one-sentence summary as freewriting towards more sophisticated reporting. Silver Stanfill, Anchorage Community College, advocates the following formula:
   (a) Identify the thing being summarized;
   (b) tell what it begins with;
   (c) tell what it's got in the middle (what it is mostly about; he[illegible]l with wording are covers, presents, and develops [illegible] idea that...);
   (d) tell what it ends with.

   An effective class exercise, which can be done daily, is to have students summarize in their journals each day what happened in class in one sentence, an assignment which can quickly and easily move the class towards analysis and evaluation by using questions such as "What was most useful? Least useful?"

9. Name your name: that is, go to the library and find out what your name means. How does knowing its meaning change or affect your attitude towards it? (Groups Program, Indiana University)

10. Tell us about an adult of whom you were afraid as a child.

III. ANALYZING

1. Assume that Dr. Alfred Futura is preparing a time capsule for the future. Write a letter to Dr. Futura suggesting three items which you think representative of the 1970s. What are the three items? What is representative about them? Are they significant? What will future generations think about us as a result of your choices?

2. Write an article for your school paper discussing two popular television shows and why you think they are popular in the 1970s. What values do they endorse? What do these shows provide that a contemporary audience needs? (Suggestion: "The Waltons" and "Star Trek)

3. Discuss a decision or experience which turned out differently from what you expected.

4. Describe the loss of a valued possession (or person). Why was the thing valuable? What effect did its loss have upon you? How did you compensate for the loss?

5. Describe an object or event from two points of view. (Or to make the assignment more specific: Assume that a student has been called before the honor council for cheating. Describe the event from the student and teacher's point of view.)

6. Relate an experience in which you can say "I changed my mind." What were the circumstances? Your mind changed from what to what? What then does it mean to change one's mind? (William Coles, Composing, Hayden Books, 1974).

7. Create an imaginary incident in which a husband tries to explain football, baseball, etc. to his wife while watching a game on television.

8. Describe a childhood hero (real,cartoon, mythical). Why did you admire the person? What qualities made you wish to be like the person? (Groups Program, Indiana University)

9. Assume that you are the defense attorney in a highly publicized case 9preferably murder). Present your summation to the jury. (Note: you will need to present the facts of the case and analyze those facts in your client's behalf.) This assignment may be based upon a real murder case with the advantage that students would have to research the case in order to write the paper. See W. Keith Kraus, Murder, Mischief, and Mayhem: A Process for Creative Research Papers (NCTE, 1978, Stock #32200).

10. The possibilities for creative assignments about literature which require analysis are, of course, infinite. Many college teachers of introductory literature courses make the mistake of using terms such as "analyze" and "criticize" in their writing assignments. Assignments for writing about literature can profitably be designed using Moffett's sequence: recording a dramatic skit which students enact in class. It is also valuable writing practice to have students convert a short story or poem into a script for acting in class. Freewriting can issue from having students write different endings, assume that they are a character and write letters explaining their motives, etc. Such freewriting will enable students to use evidence and to acquire a focus.

IV. EVALUATING

Evaluating is the most difficult of skills because it is more abstract and moves towards theorizing. Also it is a skill requiring authority on the part of our students, a quality which few of them possess. Yet we regularly ask our students to write papers showing why one work of literature is better than another. Such an assignment is usually too difficult for college freshmen, especially if we have not carefully prepared them to complete such an assignment. In designing assignments which require evaluation, we should be especially careful to allow students to choose topics about which they are knowledgeable.

(OVER)

Evaluation

1. Read Robert Frost's Poem "The Road not Taken." Discuss with the class the dilemma of two equally attractive choices. Ask students to recreate (in whatever form they wish - story,essay, letter, interior monologue) a situation in their own lives in which they were faced with choices. Why did they make the choice? Was it the right one? What were the consequences?

2. Assume that you are an executive for a major television network. You must cancel one of two situation comedies. The ratings are approximately equal; thus you must consider the merit of the shows themselves. Write a recommendation to your boss explaining your reasons for choosing one show over another. (This assignment can be varied-one employee instead of another, etc.)

3. Assume that you are President of the United States. What one major change would you make and why?

4. Assume that you have been asked to write a sports column for your local newspaper. An important game is coming up (any sport you choose). Predict the winner, explaining the reasons why.

5. Write a review of a current film for two different audiences. For example, write a letter to a friend, explaining why the film is or is not worth seeing. Write another review for the shhool paper. (This assignment will require some freewriting assignments to prepare students for completing it. It is a good idea to view a film in class and discuss it thoroughly. Look at sample reviews and analyze them in terms of audience. Then have students do preliminary freewriting assignments to prepare them to write their final reviews.)